

# AN OLD LOVER

BY  
ELIZA  
ORNE  
WHITE

heart was full of the exultant happiness of a schoolboy. It was of that other woman he was thinking, and of the time when he had loved her, nearly forty years ago. At each stage of the journey the Rev. Francis Hollis left a few years of his life behind him, until by the time he reached Eppingham he was ridiculously young. On the station platform he looked eagerly to the left. The trees had grown; they made such a bower of yellow and red that he could only catch a glimpse of the Wyatts' chimneys in the distance. The village, with its white houses and two slender white spires, had changed very little in forty years. To be sure there were evidences of electric lights and telephones, and men and women were making their swift way on bicycles through the sleepy streets, but these things did little to impair the general impression of aristocratic conservatism and peaceful self-satisfaction.

When Mr. Hollis reached the Newhall farm his father-in-law was standing on the doorstep to greet him. It was six years since they had met, a trifling space of time in the life of the octogenarian, and his son-in-law could truthfully say, "You have not changed in the least. You have learned the secret of eternal youth."

"I am eternal age would come nearer it," said the old man. "You've grown fleshy, Frank, and you are getting gray. That doesn't seem right in a boy like you," he added with a smile.

"I suppose you will see the Wyatts when you are stopping with Clara?" Peter Newhall said after supper, as he and his son-in-law were sitting in the parlor that was only used on state occasions. "Would Letitia be well enough to see me if I were to call there to-morrow? I want to see them all."

"I don't know. I haven't seen her for a long time. She's a real sweet woman, Lucy Wyatt."

"I never could forgive her for the way she treated Alec."

"I'll own I'd felt kind of hard to her all these years," said the old man, "but when I come to talk with her and see her with the same childlike eyes and yellow hair, but so changed in her face, and when I see the tears come into her eyes at the sound of my poor boy's name I feel different. And I thought, 'if she was to blame, I guess she had her own punishment.' But so far as I could find out it was her folk that made the trouble. I kind of mistrusted all along that Letitia was at the bottom of it."

"Letitia! I am sure she would never use undue influence. She is the most consistent woman I know."

"Maybe you're right. Conscience often makes folk interfere with other people. Not that I blame Letitia. My boy was a

good match for Lucy Wyatt, according to Letitia's ideas. Only what riled me was the cold way they treated him. Well, it ain't no use cryin' over spilt milk. What's past is past. Letitia Wyatt is a good woman. She's a church member, and I haven't any call to find fault with her. Only, sometimes as I sit here alone and the past keeps coming up until it seems more clear than the present, I get to thinking of how it might have been. But what's neither here nor there. If they only treated my boy like a friend and wouldn't have gone West, and there never would have been the trouble with the other woman. But my poor lad got desperate, and he thought it wasn't any use trying to be a good man so long as there was the fact that he came of farmers' people to stand between him and the girl he loved."

The picture of Letitia Wyatt that the Rev. Francis Hollis carried in his heart for so many years was not to be altered by a single detail on account of the remarks of a disappointed old man. Mr. Hollis felt sure that Letitia had used no undue influence with Lucy. When he went to stay with his sister, Mrs. Simonds, in the village, he questioned her. Clara was very fond of Letitia.

"How are the Wyatts?" he asked carefully on the evening of his arrival.

"Deborah is always the picture of health, Lucy is never very strong and Letitia is just getting over the grip. You would think by the way the other two go on she had had pneumonia."

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distance. Deborah and Lucy are so different."

"I am very fond of Letitia—I always was. I don't think it is fair to call a woman selfish merely because she has her own way. She is the oldest, and has a right to her way, and it is a very good way. I am sure the doctor has his way in this house, not that I grudge it to him; but some one has to have the casting vote in every household. Letitia and I always get on beautifully together. Only I can never seem to get close to her."

When Mr. Hollis made his call at the Wyatts' he was disappointed to find that Letitia was not well enough to see him. Deborah was out, and Lucy brought down an invitation to him from Letitia to take tea with them at 6 o'clock the next afternoon.

"I am so glad to see you, Mr. Hollis," Lucy said, with her half-shy but wholly sincere manner.

Lucy always liked boys, gray-haired or otherwise, and felt wonderfully at ease with her sister's old lover, while he, on his side, was charmed with her. They talked on general topics and neighborhood gossip for a time. In those days when he had first fallen in love with Letitia, Lucy had been a tiny girl, a very captivating child, who had insisted that he should hold her on his knee and tell her stories. At last they began to talk of those far-away times.

"You used to tell me delightful stories of what you did when you were a little boy."

"Dig! It seems like a fairy tale now to think that I ever was a little boy. Youth is a good thing. I wish when we had it we ever knew how good a thing it is."

"I wish so too, with all my heart."

Alec was so strongly present in Lucy's mind that it was only by an effort that she could prevent herself from saying his name. She hastily changed the subject and spoke of Frances Simonds and of her desire to be a trained nurse.

"I can't tell you how strongly I feel on the subject of girls asserting their individuality."

He looked at the gentle woman before him, who had never in her whole life asserted hers.

"I wish you had felt that when you were 20," he burst out.

"Sometimes I think the sin of not daring to do, the sin of quiescence, is the greatest sin of all in the Lord's eyes," she returned impulsively.

The barriers of conventionality were down.

"You must not feel like that. You have nothing to reproach yourself with," he said hastily, his past condemnation wholly forgotten.

"You were so young, you naturally took the advice of others older and wiser than yourself."

"That does not clear me from responsibility. We cannot put our sins off on other people. I have grown to know this lately. I gave up a friend because I hadn't the courage to be loyal to him."

"Poor Alec! He hadn't the strength of will to be true to you, but he always loved you dearly."

They were interrupted by the ringing of a bell. That bell seemed to Lucy like the symbol of her whole life. She started to her feet; Bridget was out and Letitia needed her.

"I must go to Letitia," she said.

"I thought he would never leave," Letitia complained as Lucy entered the room. "He doesn't know when to go any better than he used to. He has been here forty minutes by the clock. I didn't suppose he would stay when he found I couldn't see him. I ought to have had my egg-nog at 4 and it is twenty minutes past. I would not have rung for you, but I began to feel really faint and hopeless as to his ever going away. Well, run along now, and make me, my egg-nog."

When Lucy brought it up fluffy with the lightly beaten egg, her sister said, "You are very good to do this for me, dear. I like your egg-nogs better than Bridget's; they are lighter."

She tasted it. "It is perfectly delicious, and I should say that you forgot the salt."

"I did," Lucy owned ruefully. "I'll run down and get it."

"Never mind. I don't want to wait. It is very good without the salt. I merely reminded you of it for another time. Tell me, is Frank Hollis very much changed?"

she asked, when her hunger was appeased.

"He has grown stout and gray, and he is rather bald, but he seemed just the same person inside."

"Inside? What a strange girl you are!" "I mean that his being gray and middle-aged seems an accident. He is young at heart."

"If there is one thing that I dislike more than another, it is your young, middle-aged person," said Letitia. "I have been making my plans for to-morrow night. Deborah is so set she will be sure to oppose me, and we will have to use a great deal of tact. I want Frank Hollis to see that we have not stood still while the world has moved, and I am going to borrow Laura Macauley's candlesticks and pink shades."

"Mr. Hollis is the most informal sort of person," Lucy affirmed. "I don't believe he would care or even notice how the table looked."

"He would take in the general effect. I want quail on toast for tea. Deborah does not care for quail, but they are the proper thing. Laura always has them and I am very fond of quail. We will get half a dozen, and there will be two left that you and I can have for our dinner the next day. Here comes Deborah. Be sure to back me up, dear."

Deborah stoutly refused to borrow Laura Macauley's candlesticks.

"The idea of making a spurge for Frank Hollis!" she exclaimed. "It is absurd!"

Letitia had her way in the end, as usual, but it was only after a wearing discussion, and she was obliged to dispatch Lucy to the Macauleys for the candlesticks.

When the long-expected hour came and Frank Hollis entered his old friend's house, with the delightful prospect of a whole evening spent in her society, it was Deborah who greeted him, for Letitia had not yet come down. It was a chilly day and all the windows were closed in the cheerful parlor and a fire was burning on the hearth. The room felt close, and Mr. Hollis glanced involuntarily at the thermometer, which stood at 72.

"It is frightfully hot," Deborah observed sympathetically. "I will open the windows wide for a moment. Letitia and I are like Jack Sprat and his wife. She does not like a breath of air, and I feel as if I were going to have an attack of apoplexy without it. Here comes Letitia," she added presently. "Shut the windows, quick, Frank!"

For one moment her hair so thickly streaked with gray and her colorless complexion gave him a sharp sense of pain; after that he was ready to admit that she was still a handsome woman. She had the same slender figure, and of the haughty inclination of her head seemed to be more habitual with her than when she was a girl, and the smile to have grown less frequently, it was no less gracious when it came.

"Haven't the windows been opened in this room?" was Letitia's first question. She fixed her eyes on guilty Deborah.

"Only for a minute."

"I feel the dampness. I am sorry to be so troublesome, but I shall have to ask you to put on another stick of wood and to get me my white Chuddah shawl."

Lucy came in just then, and after a few minutes they went out into the dining-room. Mr. Hollis was struck by the modern air of the table, with the four silver candlesticks and their pink shades, while the lettuce with a French dressing and the quail on toast were an equal surprise to him. He was very hungry, and felt obstructively masculine as he seated himself between Letitia and Deborah, and tried to assume an indifference to food that he did not feel. As the meal proceeded it was evident to the Reverend Francis Hollis that there was to be nothing noteworthy in his conversation with Letitia until they were alone. Deborah did most of the talking, and with her ready wit and piquant figures of speech was always amusing. He wondered she had never impressed him more in the old days.

"Will you have another quail?" Miss Deborah asked him, when a discussion on anti-imperialism had begun to languish.

Something in Letitia's expression warned him that Deborah's question had been indiscreet, and that he ought to reply in the negative, but he found himself saying: "I will. I feel very apologetic, bringing my man's appetite in among all you ladies."

"Frank, you are a great comfort to me," said Miss Deborah. "I have a man's appetite myself, and quail never satisfies it, but I couldn't ask for cold beef for myself alone. Bridget, please bring in some slices of cold beef for Mr. Hollis and me."

Letitia's face told him plainly that he would write himself out of her good books if he helped himself to cold beef; nevertheless he went boldly over to Deborah's side. He remembered one or two occasions in their childhood when he and Deborah had been partners in scrapes long before he had fallen in love with Letitia. Letitia, he remembered, had been rather an aggravating little girl. Frank and Deborah joked merrily and talked of their childhood as they ate the cold beef. He was sure that those candlesticks, with their pink shades, had never emanated from Deborah's brain. Letitia had grown silent. He knew she was displeased with him. Letitia's silence had always been a more formidable weapon than the open anger of other women. How handsome she looked! She had a little color now, and he was beginning to like her gray hair.

When tea was over the sisters slipped away, one at a time, just as they had done in the old days when there had been twice as many of them, and Francis Hollis found himself alone with Letitia. He longed to get close to her inner self, and to know what the years had brought her, but she continued to keep him at arm's length. He had never felt near her, even when his love was the greatest, but then he had supposed this was because of his inferiority. Now he was puzzled. Those beautiful eyes with their unfathomable expression suggested a deep nature. He felt that she was too reserved to confide in any one, and that she had passed through childhood and youth to middle age, a solitary figure, asking neither advice nor sympathy.

"Those were the good days," he stated. "I never see a young man just starting out in life that I don't feel a great sense of envy."

"I see no reason to regret youth," said Letitia, leaning back gracefully and drawing her white shawl about her. "Youth is a time of strain and stress, when we long for the impossible. As we grow older, if we are moderately unselfish, we find our interest centering in other people. Middle age is far more restful time of life."

"You were always reasonable, Letitia. For myself, I would give anything in the world to be young again."

"I can understand feeling so if one has wasted one's opportunities, but when people have done useful work in the world and have a little to regret as you and I have, why is not one period of life as satisfying as another?"

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THE Rev. Francis Hollis was in that nervous state of mind that is apt to precede a journey when it is a rare event. He took out his watch. "Five minutes of three. Jones ought to be here," he said impatiently.

"You didn't order the carriage until 3," his wife reminded him, timidly. "You must give a great deal of love to father," she added, "and to your sisters Clara and Frances, and the doctor, and to—" she hesitated. "I suppose you will see the Wyatts?"

"If I have time I shall look them up," he answered.

"Clara says Letitia is as handsome as ever," she ventured. "How long is it since you have seen her? It must be twenty years at least."

"It is all of that."

"She will find you very much changed."

"Changed?" He turned on her sharply. "Yes, you have grown so much stouter, and you are getting so gray. It is very becoming to you," Mrs. Hollis hastened to add. "I never saw you looking better than you are looking this minute; I was only thinking she would find a difference. We are middle-aged people now, Frank."

He looked at his wife, with her plump, matronly figure and gray hair. Sophy had never been pretty, and, on the whole, the years had been kind to her; she had gained more than she had lost. Still, it was true, they were middle-aged people according to the ideas of the world, and perhaps it was too much to expect her to understand him so completely as to be able to realize that there were days when he felt like an ardent boy, in spite of his 60 years. This was one of those days. It was not of Sophy, who had been his faithful wife for more than thirty years, that he was thinking as the carriage drew up to the door, but of a girl whose marvelous beauty had won his heart nearly forty years ago.

The Rev. Francis Hollis had been a devoted husband, according to the average standard; he had nothing to reproach himself with, he declared, as he went down the doorsteps, and yet in all those years there had not been a time when the mere mention of this other woman's name had not quickened his pulses. Safe at the bottom of a drawer in his study was her photograph, and deep down in the bottom of his mind was the thought of her. Letitia Wyatt was the most beautiful woman he had ever known, and the most gifted. Her standard had been so high that she could not think of him for a husband, but this had only set her on a more lofty pinnacle. Humility was not his chief characteristic, but he was very humble whenever he thought of Letitia Wyatt.

"Frank, aren't you going to kiss me good-by?" Sophy asked, running down the steps after him.

"I thought I had." He turned and kissed her with hasty perfunctoriness. "Don't mope while I am gone. Have a good time."

As the carriage was taking Mr. Hollis away from his wife, he did not once think of her. He was fond of Sophy, more so than she imagined or than he realized himself, but he was going East, and his

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